

PODCASTING FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH iTunes U: THE LEARNER'S VIEW

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iTunes U has become the main worldwide provider of educational podcasts but, despite its popularity, little is known about the type of user who downloads iTunes U language resources, or how those resources are used. This paper presents the results of the first major survey (1891 responses) of users of one of the most successful iTunes U content providers in terms of downloads. It presents a profile of the iTunes U language learner, their listening habits, and their opinion of the resources they download. Comparisons are drawn between language learners and learners of other subjects. The results show that in contrast with profiles of learners in other contexts—such as virtual learning environment-delivered podcasts, identified in previous research (mostly carried out with young university students who download podcasts for instrumental reasons)—iTunes U language learners are different. Respondents in this study are mostly middle-aged and employed, and they download resources for personal interest. Users have a high opinion of the quality of the materials, and they believe the materials help them to learn. The results also show that users listen to language podcasts on mobile devices, in sharp contrast with previous research. Finally, the paper discusses implications for further research.

Key words: iTunes U, Podcasting, Lifelong Learning, Learner Profile, Mobile Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers have long used audio-visual media for language instruction, traditionally using formats such as vinyl, cassettes, videotapes, CDs, and DVDs, as they became available, in the classroom or language laboratory. With the arrival of digital media, the provision of (first audio, then audio-visual) media content for learners moved online through the use of websites, virtual learning environments, learning management systems, and podcasting.

In a relatively short time, podcasting has revolutionised access to media and educational resources. The use of digital audio and video files has become widespread and commonplace across most of the world, helped by the proliferation of resources and the increase in availability and affordability of portable media players. In the field of education, this has afforded unprecedented, easy and convenient access to learning and teaching materials in and outside the classroom.

The main agent in the podcasting revolution has been iTunes, Apple's digital media store, launched in 2003. From 2005, built-in podcast support has been provided. In 2007, Apple released iTunes U as a repository for educational content provided by universities. Some of that content is restricted to the institutions' own students, and some is made publicly available. With this initiative, Apple and the universities that agreed to deliver open content changed access to hitherto exclusive world-class lecturers and materials. iTunes U has now established itself as the main provider of educational podcasts, with over 1 billion downloads between 2007 and 2013 (Apple, 2013). An iTunes U app (software application) was launched in 2012 to provide mobile access and new affordances to the software, such as linking resources (e.g., audio and e-books to form a course).

This paper reports on a major study of iTunes U users who utilise the resources available there to learn languages. First, it will describe the research carried out so far into the use of podcasting as a language teaching and learning tool. Then, this paper will present a number of questions and hypotheses about the language learners who use iTunes U, and it will provide details of the study that was conducted to answer those questions, shedding light on the aforementioned hypotheses. The results of the study will be presented and discussed. Finally, this paper will offer a conclusion based on the findings and identify areas for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Podcasting as a Teaching and Learning Tool

A number of factors have contributed to the popularity and growth of podcasting. These include the expansion of broadband and wireless connectivity, the ease and relatively low cost to produce podcasts, the adoption of podcasting by major media broadcasters as a way of delivering catch-up services, the shift towards increasingly mobile devices, and the success of the portable digital media player and its integration into other devices such as the mobile phone. In a review of emerging technologies written around the time when podcasts first emerged, Chinnery (2006) highlighted the potential for learning of cell phones, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), and podcasting as three separate technologies. Nowadays, the features from these three technologies—all considered to have the potential to aid language learning—converge on devices such as the smartphone. The growth in podcasting and its popularity has run parallel to the increase in use of podcasting as a teaching and learning tool, both by enthusiastic individuals and institutions.

Following increases in podcasting's availability and popularity from 2003, the technology soon caught the attention of early adopters among academic practitioners and researchers. The first reports described the potential uses and benefits of podcasting (Blaisdell, 2006; Clark & Walsh, 2004; Laing et al., 2006; Manning, 2005; Meng, 2005; Sloan, 2005). These included the convenient, portable and easy to use format, its attractiveness, low cost, capability to personalise learning and integrate different types of activity. Early papers also highlighted some drawbacks. Many of these were technical limitations that have been overcome as technology has progressed, but others included pedagogical considerations such as accessibility, increase in teacher workload, digital literacy, learning style issues, and the use of outmoded approaches that do not reflect current theories on teaching and learning.

Research moved on to evaluations of podcasting based on its use by teachers and learners (some early studies include Belanger, 2005; Edirisingha, Rizzi, Nie, & Rothwell, 2007; Lee & Chan, 2007; McCarty, 2005). These studies were mostly based on university campuses and produced a range of results (see Heilesen, 2010; Hew, 2009; and Rosell-Aguilar, 2009 for overviews of different projects and their outcomes). The general impression was that some of the perceived benefits of podcasting may not in fact be so beneficial. For example, despite some evidence of students listening whilst travelling (Manochehri, Gromik, & Aw, 2012), many studies found little evidence of transfer of resources to mobile devices, putting into question the benefits of portability and informality (Bennett, 2008; Copley, 2007; Lee & Chan, 2007; Lee, Miller, & Newham, 2009). The hypothesised attractiveness and novelty of using podcast materials appeared to wear off soon, and student practices with the podcast resources they used suggested that they perceived their use as yet another formal learning opportunity: learners engaged with the materials as they would a class assignment. There were also mixed reports about attainment, ranging from disappointingly poor performance (e.g., Daniel & Woody, 2010) to significantly increased scores after delivering podcast-based teaching (e.g., McKinney, Dyck, & Luber, 2009; Reynolds & Bennett, 2008). Many researchers concluded that podcasting may work best to supplement teaching rather than as the main medium of delivery of teaching materials (Bennett, 2008; Daniel & Woody, 2010; Evans, 2008; Heilesen, 2010; Lee & Chan, 2007; Walls et al., 2010).

Podcasting for Language Learning

As a discipline that integrates target language audio recordings into learning and teaching activities, language learning was quickly identified as a potential beneficiary of the affordances that podcasting provides as a teaching and learning tool (Chinnery, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2005; Kukulska-Hulme, 2006; Stanley, 2006; Thorne & Payne, 2005). Arguments have been put forward to explain how the use of podcasting in language learning is supported by a number of learning theories, including constructivist approaches, informal and lifelong learning, and mobile learning principles, as well as the practices of providing learning objects, chunking, and just-in-time teaching, among others (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007). Podcasting also fits with practices supported by a number of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories as being conducive to language learning. One obvious use is the access to target language materials as sources of information about the usage of the language (Ryan, 1997), which have the potential to draw the learner into the communicative world of the target language community (Little, 1997). Gromik (2008) highlighted that podcasting technology provides learners “access to resources which are authentic, free, and otherwise not available” (p. 50) in territories where the target language is not spoken. Podcasting offers opportunities for active exploration, observation, processing, and interpretation of language, all activities which have been identified as conducive to language learning (Cooper, 1993). The ability to find many resources on a topic allows for narrow listening, the listening to several different input sources on the same topic, (Krashen, 1996). Furthermore, podcasting affords a personalised listening experience, as users can choose when and where to listen and what to listen to, when to pause, rewind, speed up or slow down a recording, or engage in repeated listening. Podcast resources can provide the basis for meaningful and engaging activities, and they offer opportunities to listen to comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003), permitting listeners to focus on specific features of the target language.

The advantages of podcasting go beyond the technical affordances it provides. In the same way that the initial introduction of the World Wide Web into education led to an increase in learning materials online, the popularisation of podcasting has led to the proliferation of a wealth of materials—developed by individuals, institutions, or broadcasters—that are of use to the language learner. This material includes both resources specifically designed to aid language learning and target language materials created for native speakers of those languages. Language learners and teachers can use these materials, much like radio and television programmes have been used in language teaching and learning for decades (for recent reviews of identified uses of podcasting for language learning and ideas for its use in the classroom see Lomicka and Lord (2011), and Shinagawa (2012)).

An important difference between the use of podcasting for teaching and learning languages and its use for other disciplines is that listening for language learning requires a different kind of listening skill set. While in other disciplines the focus is on the content and meaning of the audiovisual resources, in the field of language learning the focus of listening also lies—to varying degrees—on form, through which learners become aware of grammatical, pronunciation, or other features of the language they are using or are exposed to (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 2000; Skehan, 2003).

Some researchers have pointed out that the major limitation of podcasting for language learning is that, although it provides access to audiovisual resources, it does not afford another essential element of language learning: interaction (Stockwell, 2010). Whilst this is true of the podcasts of their own—for example, when the learner uses a device that can only play the media such as a traditional iPod—there are a number of ways in which interaction based on the podcast resources can be encouraged. These range from basic-level engagement with ancillary materials that can be provided with the podcasts (e.g., transcripts or print exercises) to more advanced incorporation of other technologies (e.g., in Virtual Learning Environment/Learning Management System contexts, where the resources can be integrated with quizzes and forums, or in combination with other applications available on their device as in the case of smartphones or tablets). In addition, when podcasts are not used individually but as part of a group

activity (in or outside the classroom), they can provide input to engage in activities conducive to interaction such as reporting, discussing, summarising, comparing, contrasting, and so forth.

Previous Research into Podcasting as a Language Learning Tool

A number of research studies into the use of podcasting for language learning have been carried out. Some initial research focused on student ownership and use of mobile devices (Dias, Pagel, Browne, & Menish, 2007). There were early reports of positive impressions of podcasting as a tool for language learning (Anzai, 2007; O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007; Sathe & Waltje, 2008). The Sathe and Waltje study had several major findings: 56.7% of their 120 respondents agreed that the iPods they had been lent helped them to learn language better; 77.3% enjoyed doing listening exercises with the iPod; 67.6% felt more motivated to spend time on listening and speaking assignments; and 50.9% believed there had been an increase in their knowledge of the target language.

Research on podcasting has also focused on actual language skill acquisition. Lord (2008) carried out a small study with 16 students taking an undergraduate Spanish phonetics class in the United States. The students' attitudes and abilities were assessed both before and after the project. She found very positive reactions and an improvement in attitudes toward Spanish pronunciation, as well as "at least some degree of improved pronunciation" (p. 374). Lord acknowledged the difficulty in determining whether these improvements were the direct result of the podcasting activities or taking the class in general, but she considered the evidence sufficient to warrant further investigation. Ducate and Lomicka (2009) carried out another study into the acquisition of pronunciation and, although they did not find statistically significant improvements, their students viewed the integration of podcast use and production positively.

Abdous, Camarena, and Facer (2009) surveyed students from eight language courses and reported that the participants felt that using podcasts had had a positive effect on their study habits, that the podcasts had been a helpful learning tool, and that using the podcasts had led to improvement in their language skills (oral and aural skills in particular) and vocabulary. They concluded that "podcasting can be an effective tool which facilitates the completion and evaluation of assignments in foreign language classes" (p. 88). In a more recent report, Abdous, Facer, and Yen (2012) presented research carried out in 27 language classes over three years. Their findings suggest that the way in which podcast language learning resources are integrated into the teaching has an effect on grades, with students taking courses that used podcasting as supplementary revision material faring better than those taking courses where podcasting was integrated into the curriculum.

iTunes U as a Language Learning Tool

How much of the knowledge previously acquired about learning through podcasting applies to the iTunes U language learner? There is some evidence that learners' role—whether users listen because they are students of the subject in the institution that provides the podcasts (referred to in this paper as internal learners) or whether they listen as part of the "interested public" (external learners)—may have an effect on their podcast listening practices (Hürst, Welte, & Jung, 2007). This finding could be related to the differences between intrinsic motivation (driven by personal interest) and extrinsic motivation (driven by the desire to achieve a goal such as passing a course) in language learning (Oxford, 1996); this result may have bearing on teaching delivered through iTunes U. Many of the research projects listed above took place in traditional face-to-face institutions, where the researchers provided podcast resources to their students mostly via virtual learning environments and learning management systems. Participants in these research projects reported lack of transfer to mobile devices and perceiving the activity as academic, which is not surprising given that in most cases students are bound to look at an activity that their teacher has asked them to do as part of their formal studies. In this sense, the motivation of traditional students for engaging (or not) with the podcasts can be considered extrinsic. iTunes U users, in contrast, may use language learning resources to supplement their formal learning or they could be informal learners with an interest in a language who do not regard listening to iTunes U resources as a formal learning

opportunity. In these latter cases, the motivation for engaging with the iTunes U resources would be mostly intrinsic. In this sense, the delivery of resources through iTunes U as opposed to other delivery systems has the potential to make a considerable difference in terms of the audience (internal or external and intrinsically or extrinsically motivated) reached by these resources. This study, therefore, looks at iTunes U as a separate delivery medium different from podcasting in general.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the research literature, and in the interest of developing a profile of the iTunes U language learner, a survey was developed to gather data to answer four main research questions:

1. Who are the iTunes U language learners?
2. Do they differ from learners of other subjects?
3. How do iTunes U language learners engage with the resources they download?
4. What is the learners' opinion of the resources they have downloaded?

The survey was organised in different sections, which included:

- Personal information: age, gender, geographical location, occupation.
- Studies and interest in iTunes U resources: whether users are currently enrolled in a language course or are considering taking one; reasons for downloading iTunes U resources; whether the resources downloaded are the main source of learning or supplementary to other learning.
- Use of iTunes U resources: whether users transfer the resources to mobile devices, where they listen; whether listening is the main activity or whether they listen whilst doing something else.
- Opinion of the iTunes U resources: whether users think listening to the resources is helping them learn the language; what their rating of the overall quality of the materials is.
- Taking iTunes U learning further: whether the users would consider paying for content; whether they would be interested in receiving some sort of university course credit based on the iTunes U resources.

Due to the lack of available data about iTunes U learners, eight hypotheses were formulated before the survey was launched about the responses that it would elicit. These hypotheses were based partly on the characteristics of participants in previous research studies that were considered applicable to iTunes U learners, as well as educated guesses based on knowledge of language learners and listeners of podcasts and iTunes U resources. The hypotheses related to:

1. Gender. It is a general perception that men are early adopters of technology, but language learning traditionally attracts more female than male students (HESA, 2012). The hypothesis was that language iTunes U resources would attract more females than males, but the difference in proportion would not be as marked as that of traditional university language students.
2. Age. The majority of users were expected to be young. Podcasting is often associated with a young audience, as is the iTunes store; furthermore, previous research on iTunes U has been carried out with typical university-age students. Despite this, the hypothesis was that a proportion of respondents would be older, in a similar way to the results found by Hürst, Welte, and Jung (2007).
3. Employment status. It was assumed that students would represent the highest proportion of users of iTunes U resources (most students in developed countries have smartphones and portable media players), but not necessarily the majority: part of the iTunes U appeal is that it brings learning to users who would not otherwise have access to it. It was not assumed that

these students would be enrolled at the institution where the research took place, but perhaps taking courses in another institution and supplementing their materials with iTunes U resources. It was also thought that podcasting might appeal to users who have retired from their working life, who are curious and who have more time to engage with iTunes U resources.

4. Use of mobile learning features. The hypothesis here was that this would be very different from previous research, given that the delivery medium is iTunes U and not a virtual learning environment or learning management system. The hypothesis was that transfer to mobile devices and listening on the go would be higher than previously reported.
5. Engagement. Despite the previous hypothesis, it was expected that language learners would engage in listening as a main activity, as they would be more likely to focus on form than non-language learners. Since some universities provide speech transcripts for their iTunes U files, higher numbers of downloads and use of transcripts might provide evidence of focus on form.
6. Rating. It was predicted that users would rate iTunes U resources highly, as these are free resources from well-regarded universities.
7. Paying for content. It was assumed that the vast majority of users would not be willing to pay for content. As users of iTunes U, they would be aware of the large amount of freely-available materials they can download.
8. Course credit. It was assumed that users would not be interested in receiving course credit, as many would already be formally studying languages, and the rest would be independent learners for whom language learning may be an informal, lifelong process.

CONTEXT AND METHODS

Context

A number of institutions have become key players on iTunes U, providing the largest number of resources and generating the most downloads. The research study for this paper was carried out at the UK Open University (OU), one of the top iTunes U providers in terms of number of downloads (Apple, 2013; Open University, 2012).

The OU is a distance learning university. It was established in 1969 and is now the university with the largest number of students in the United Kingdom, with 208,710 registered in 2012 (HESA, 2012). Its languages department is the largest in the United Kingdom, and it offers modules in Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Welsh. These modules are taught at a distance through a mixed media of print, audio and video materials, interactive digital materials (online or DVD-ROM based), and a mix of online and face-to-face tutorials.

The OU joined iTunes U in June, 2008, upon receiving an invitation from Apple. Whereas many universities offer recordings of lectures that have been delivered face-to-face at their institution and then uploaded to iTunes U, the type of resources that the OU offers on iTunes U is quite different. For the most part, the OU collections consist of a number of shorter (1–15 minutes) recordings which have been designed as distance learning materials, either because they have been repurposed from the university's own course materials, or designed specifically for delivery through the university's media channels, including YouTube and iTunes U. As of February, 2013, 428 collections containing 3,261 tracks (1,484 audio, 1,777 video, as well as 423 iBooks) are available for download from iTunes U at the OU (Open University, 2013). In addition, transcripts in PDF format are provided for over 96% of the tracks.

The type of language resources that are offered on iTunes U at the OU varies. They represent all the languages taught at the OU and many of the different levels (beginner, intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced). Some collections for beginner or intermediate levels include a teaching voice in English

combined with recordings in the target language. Other collections are mini documentaries that explore the cultures of the target languages, in addition to focusing on the language itself.

As of February, 2013, the OU had generated over 60 million downloads (Open University, 2013). Almost 90% of the downloads of iTunes U at the OU are from outside the United Kingdom, where the OU is located and best known. The United States is the country where most downloads originate (see [Figure 1](#)).

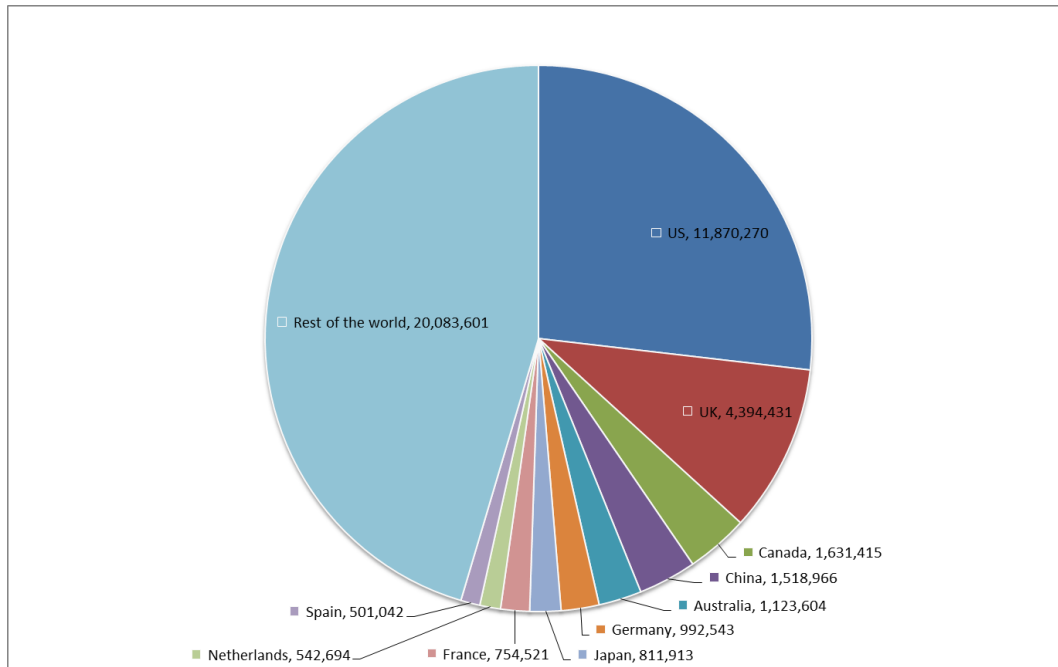


Figure 1. Geographical location of iTunes U downloads from the OU host.

Language collections represent around 10% of the total number of collections the OU offers, but they account for nearly a quarter of all downloads generated, making them the most popular resources on iTunes U at the OU. They are also among the most popular overall: the OU language collections often occupy the entire top-10 downloads for language resources on iTunes U in the United Kingdom.

Methods

The user survey was created using SurveyMonkey, and a link to this survey was placed on all the individual pages as well as the home page of iTunes U at the OU. Though the link to the survey was active for 21 months (August, 2009 to April, 2011), almost 95% of the responses were collected within the first 12 months. There are several reasons for this: in August, 2010, the display of external links on iTunes U changed, making the link to the survey less prominent. Also, iTunes U does not display hyperlinks to users who access iTunes U directly from a mobile device. Access to iTunes U from mobile devices grew immensely during the time that the survey was active, another reason for the drop in respondents.

In total, 2129 responses were collected. Participants were asked whether they use the iTunes U resources mostly for learning or mostly for teaching. Respondents who indicated that they use the iTunes U resources mostly for teaching (238) were eliminated from the data, reducing the informant pool size to 1891. Of these, 455 (24.1%) selected language learning as the main category of iTunes U resources they downloaded, whereas the number of non-language learners was 1436 (75.9%). The data were statistically analysed using SPSS 20. Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, the data analysis used descriptive statistics only.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses are presented below in five sections: personal information, studies and interest in iTunes U language resources, use of iTunes U resources, opinion of the iTunes U resources, and taking iTunes U learning further. The results for language learners will be presented in comparison with those of non-language learners where relevant. As they are presented, the results will be discussed in terms of relevance, how they compare to the hypotheses made and previous research and literature on the subject.

Personal Information

The gender split from the survey participants between language learners and non language learners is presented in [Table 1](#). Some percentages do not add up to 100 as some participants (0.9% of total) chose not to reveal their gender. Presented below, these percentages are the average gender split in UK Higher Education Institutions for language learners and overall (HESA, 2012).

[Table 1.](#) *Gender Split.*

	Male	Female
Language Learners (LL)	52.5%	46.6%
Non Language Learners	56.4%	42.7%
Average UK Higher Education LL	30.0%	70.0%
Average UK Higher Education overall	43.6%	56.4%

A high proportion of respondents in many previous podcasting research studies was female (e.g., Bolliger, Supanakorn, & Boggs, 2010; Manochehri et al., 2012; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011). The male–female ratio for the respondents in this study is not consistent with these past studies, as the results here suggest that podcasting in general appeals somewhat more to males than females, as had been suggested in Hypothesis 1. Thus, podcasting could prove to be a format that can make language learning more attractive to male students. However, as [Table 2](#) shows, whilst the gender split by age between language learners and non-language learners confirms that iTunes U resources in general—not for

[Table 2.](#) *Age of LLs and NLLs and Gender Split Between Them.*

Age	Age LL	Male LL	Female LL	Age NLL	Male NLL	Female NLL
Under 15	.9%	25.0%	75.0%	1.5%	40.9%	54.5%
15–18	6.4%	41.4%	58.6%	5.8%	71.1%	26.5%
19–24	11.4%	50.0%	50.0%	15.5%	61.7%	37.8%
25–34	18.2%	48.2%	48.2%	20.2%	57.2%	42.1%
35–44	19.3%	47.7%	52.3%	21.3%	54.9%	43.8%
45–54	18.5%	64.3%	34.5%	19.0%	57.1%	42.5%
55–64	18.2%	54.2%	45.8%	10.5%	55.0%	45.0%
Over 65	7.0%	59.0%	40.6%	6.2%	36.0%	61.8%

Notes. LL = language learner; NLL = non-language learner. The percentages presented in the male/ female, LL/ NLL columns are percentages of the age group for the LL/ NLL category.

language learning—attracted more males than females (non-language learner males outnumbered non-language learner females in every age bracket except “under 15”) this was not the case for language learning iTunes U resources. Language courses in Higher Education were dominated by females (as shown [Table 1](#)). For the language learner respondents of this study, the proportion of male/female users was not as marked, and the results varied with age: the proportion of females was higher than that of males for the under 18 and the 35–44 age brackets, even in the 19–24 and 25–34 brackets, and lower for respondents older than 45.

As stated earlier, most studies into podcasting as a teaching and learning tool have been carried out with traditional internal learners (teens to early 20s), with the exception of Hürst et al. (2007). The age of the external users who took part in their study ranged from 17 to 53. Overall, despite the hypothesis that iTunes U would appeal to younger learners (Hypothesis 2), the highest proportions of respondents were quite evenly spread in the age brackets between 25 and 54 for non-language learners (all above 19%). Language learners were overall older than non-language learners (with the exception of a small percentage in the 15–18 bracket) and had a much higher proportion than non-language learners in the 55–64 age bracket. The reason for this may be that informal language learning appeals more to older generations who did not have the opportunity to learn at a younger age and now have opportunities to travel abroad and use some language, but this is speculative.

Cross-tabulating the data for age and gender shows that among language learners, females outnumber males in the under 18 bracket; in the 19–34 bracket they are even; and in the over 35 ranges male users are more numerous than female users. This suggests that the stereotype that podcasting technology appeals more to men than women applies to older generations only and the trend is reversed for younger users, although other factors—such as nationality or cultural background—may have an effect.

The download data ([Figure 1](#)) show that approximately 30% of downloads originated in the United States and Canada, and that the United Kingdom only accounts for around 10%. The respondent percentages for geographical location are quite different: 34.8% of all respondents live in North America (United States and Canada), 33.4% in the United Kingdom, and 17.8% in another European country. Geographical location among respondents was considerably different for language learners and non-language learners (see [Table 3](#)). Countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia/New Zealand place lower in the list for language learners than they do in the non-language learner list (in the United Kingdom the percentage drop is over 10%). This seems to confirm the tendency to give more importance to language learning in non-English-speaking countries and less importance in English-speaking countries other than the United States.

Table 3. *Ranked Geographical Location of Respondents*

Rank	Language Learners	Percentage	Non-Language Learners	Percentage
1	USA / Canada	35.4%	UK	36.6%
2	Europe (except UK)	23.5%	USA / Canada	34.6%
3	UK	23.3%	Europe (except UK)	16.1%
4	Central / South America	5.5%	Australia / NZ	4.1%
5	Asia (including Japan)	5.5%	Asia (including Japan)	3.3%
6	Australia / NZ	3.7%	Central / South America	2.6%
7	Other	2.2%	Africa / Middle East	1.6%
8	Africa / Middle East	.8%	Other	1.2%

Hypothesis 3, regarding employment status, was that students would represent the highest proportion of users of iTunes U resources, but that there would also be a considerable number of participants who are retired. The data presented in Table 4 contradict both these hypotheses. Participants in full- or part-time paid employment (including self-employed) accounted for 58.5% of respondents, whereas students only accounted for 17.7% of the total. In addition, only 11.9% of participants had retired.

Table 4. *Participant Occupation.*

Occupation	Language Learners	Non-Language Learners
In full-time paid employment	40.0%	40.3%
Student (full time)	16.6%	15.1%
Self-employed/freelance	11.9%	11.1%
Retired	10.8%	7.9%
In part-time paid employment	6.6%	6.8%
Unemployed	4.6%	5.4%
Other	3.5%	3.3%
Prefer not to say	2.0%	1.7%
Family responsibilities	1.5%	3.3%
Voluntary/charitable work	1.3%	2.0%
Student (part time)	1.1%	3.0%

The differences between language learners and non-language learners were minimal here, except for a slightly higher proportion of retired people using language resources, as the results presented in Table 2 reveal.

Studies and Interest in iTunes U Language Resources

Participants were asked whether the resources they downloaded from iTunes U at the OU were the main source of learning for their chosen subject. For 89.6% of non-language learners, the resources were additional to other learning they did, leaving 10.4% for whom the iTunes U resources were their main source of learning. This appears to be consistent with previous research which claimed that most users utilise podcasting resources as supplementary materials. For language learners, the proportion of respondents who considered the iTunes U resources their main source of learning was almost double (19.5%), whereas the remaining 80.5% supplemented their studies with the iTunes U resources.

The next question in the survey related to whether participants were currently enrolled in a course in the subject: 29.9% of non-language learners were, whereas 70.1% were not. Once again language learners were different: 21.5% of respondents were enrolled in a course and 78.5% were not. Of those who were not enrolled on a course in the subject, 52.4% were considering taking one (in the case of non-language learners the figure is 54.4%).

A possible explanation for these results is that languages are a subject area with a large aural component. It makes sense that language learners used iTunes U resources almost twice as frequently in order to learn. Languages are also a subject area where many people undertake autonomous study, which may also be a reason for the higher proportion of independent learners.

Regarding users' interest in podcasts, Hürst et al.'s research found that their participants' motivation for

listening was different depending on whether they were internal (enrolled in a course at the institution that provides the podcasts) or external (interested public) learners (2007). Whereas internal learners took part in their podcasting activities for credit, external learners did it mostly out of personal interest, although education and work featured among their reasons too. The results of this study showed similar results (Table 5), and the comparison between language learners and non-language learners shows that there were more users who downloaded for personal interest and fewer language learner than non-language learner users who were currently studying the subject. This result supports the previous suggestions that language learning is perceived as a subject that can be learnt independently, perhaps for travel or leisure reasons.

Table 5. *Interest in Podcasts.*

Interest in podcasts	Language Learners	Non-Language Learners
Personal interest	78.9%	69.5%
Relevant to current studies	11.8%	19.0%
Relevant to profession	9.3%	11.5%

Use of the iTunes U Resources

Participants were asked if they downloaded individual files or subscribed to whole iTunes U collections. On the whole, most respondents tended to do both (46.9% language learners; 46.4% non-language learners). Language learners reported a slightly higher tendency to subscribe to collections (23.3%) than non-language learners (19.3%), and consequently there was a lower tendency to download individual files (29.7% language learners; 34.3% non-language learners), but otherwise there was no marked difference in downloading habits.

As discussed in the literature review, previous research on actual use of podcasts for internal learners found little evidence of resources being transferred to mobile devices. The results of this study show that this was not the case for the participants in this study (Table 6).

Table 6. *Transfer to Mobile Devices.*

Transfer to mobile device	Language Learners	Non-Language Learners
Always / Most of the time	70.2%	62.2%
Sometimes	14.0%	17.6%
Rarely / Never	15.8%	20.1%

At the time the survey was launched, iTunes U content could not be downloaded directly to mobile devices (even though iTunes commercial content could). Instead, it had to be downloaded using a desktop or laptop and then transferred to a portable media player if the user wanted to listen to the content elsewhere. This changed halfway through the survey. The results should not be affected, however, because (as pointed out above) the vast majority of responses (95%) was gathered within the first 12 months of the data collection. It is probably safe to assume that if the pool of participants had included those who access iTunes U directly from their mobile device, the number of respondents who download directly to the device and who listen on a mobile device would be higher, perhaps significantly so. The mobile aspect of podcasting through iTunes U is corroborated by the fact that many users listen on portable devices (Table 7).

These results fit with Hypothesis 4 about transfer to mobile devices presented above. The data presented in Tables 6 and 7 suggest that language learners are more likely to transfer to and listen on a portable device than non-language learners. There is not enough data available to ascertain whether this is due to the differences in the language learners' personal profiles (e.g., their geographical location, age or gender).

Table 7. *Devices Used for Listening to Podcasts*

Where you listen	Language Learners	Non-Language Learners
Portable device	62.7%	54.9%
Laptop or notebook	26.3%	27.3%
Desktop computer	11.1%	17.8%

Another difference between participants in previous research and participants in this study is how the listening activity was perceived. Previous research had found that learners made time to listen to podcasts and considered listening an academic activity. They often took notes too. The results of this study show that, although listening was the main activity for 40.1% of language learners and 44.5% of non-language learners, more respondents listened as part of another activity, such as exercising, doing housework, or travelling (Table 8).

Table 8. *Listening as a the Main Activity or Not*

Is listening...	Language Learners	Non-Language Learners
the main activity?	40.1%	44.5%
part of another activity?	59.9%	55.5%

Despite the high level of listening on mobile devices, Hypothesis 5 stated that because language learners might be more prone to focusing on form, they would be more likely to take notes and use the transcripts provided than non-language learners. The results, however, show that few users took notes regularly and most said they rarely or never took notes (Table 9). This contradicts previous research that suggested that there was a correlation between accessing podcast content and taking notes (McKinney et al., 2009). There were no major differences between language learners and non-language learners. This, and the fact that learners listen while doing other activities, suggest that the language learners who use the iTunes U resources may not be engaging in focused listening.

Table 9. *Note-Taking*

Do you take notes as you listen?	Language Learners	Non-Language Learners
Always	3.4%	2.9%
Most of the time	7.8%	8.0%
Sometimes	32.9%	34.4%
Rarely	31.1%	27.3%
Never	24.9%	27.4%

The use of transcripts might also be considered evidence of focused listening. Language learners in this

study were indeed more likely to download them and read them as they listened than non-language learners. Language learners also found the transcripts more useful than non-language learners (see Table 10). The data do not allow us to draw conclusions about whether when these language learners engaged with the content they were focusing on meaning or form (or—most likely—both to some degree). The transfer to and use on mobile devices, the low use of transcripts and the fact that many respondents listen as part of another activity suggests that many of the learners are listening to the language materials as a casual activity.

Table 10. *Use of Transcripts.*

Do you download transcripts?	Language Learners (<i>n</i> = 455)	Non-Language Learners (<i>n</i> = 1436)
Always / Most of the time	38.6%	21.3%
Sometimes	29.3%	27.4%
Rarely / Never	32.1%	51.2%
Do you read the transcripts at the same time as you listen?	Language Learners (<i>n</i> = 312)	Non-Language Learners (<i>n</i> = 833)
Always / Most of the time	33.2%	20.7%
Sometimes	42.9%	36.6%
Rarely / Never	23.9%	42.7%
Do you find the transcripts useful?	Language Learners (<i>n</i> = 309)	Non-Language Learners (<i>n</i> = 825)
Yes	72.9%	65.9%
No	1.0%	2.2%
Sometimes	26.1%	31.9%

Note. Replies from respondents who ticked “never” in the first question were excluded from the subsequent two questions.

Opinion of the iTunes U Resources

Hypothesis 6, regarding whether respondents think listening to the iTunes U resources is helping them learn the language and their rating of the quality of the materials, was that the responses would be very positive. They were. In response to the question “Do you think that listening to the podcasts is helping you learn?” 97.2% of language learners selected “yes” and only 2.8% selected “no.” The responses from non-language learners were very similar (98.3% positive; 1.7% negative). Research on learning through podcasting has so far produced mixed results: as stated in the literature review, most researchers have concluded that podcasting is useful as a revision tool, but have reservations about its use for independent learning. In contrast with this, the results from this study suggest that podcasting through iTunes U can provide a useful source of learning to independent users as well as those supplementing their learning from other sources with iTunes U materials.

Language learning is an activity that lends itself to feeling that one is learning just by engaging with the materials. Most people understand that exposure to the target language is beneficial and audio and video resources are often used in the language classroom. Therefore, it might be expected that language learners would be more positive about the iTunes U resources than non-language learners. Table 11 shows that there were some differences between language learners and non-language learners when they were asked to rate the quality of the materials they listened to. Language learners rate the materials slightly less

positively, with fewer respondents rating them as “very good” and more rating them “OK” (although both positive categories together add up to a very similar percentage). Other ratings (variable quality and negative) received similar responses from both language learners and non-language learners. The reasons for these differences between language learners and non-language learners are hard to ascertain. Perhaps the fact that language learning is perceived as something that learners can engage with autonomously leads to higher expectations of the resources available on iTunes U.

Table 11. *Rating of the Quality of the OU on iTunes U Podcasts.*

Quality of the materials	Language Learners	Non-Language Learners
Very Good / Good	80.1%	86.3%
OK	17.8%	10.6%
Not so good / Terrible	.9%	.6%
Variable quality	1.2%	2.5%

Taking iTunes U Learning Further

The final section in the survey asked whether users would consider paying for content and whether they would be interested in paying a fee (no amount specified) to receive some sort of university credit based on the iTunes U content. Hypotheses 7 and 8 were that very few people would want to pay for content, and there might be some limited interest in receiving credit. The results showed the opposite: some 49.7% of language learners said they would be willing to pay (at the usual iTunes song price of US\$0.99, £0.79, or €0.99), and 68.3% said they would be interested in receiving university credit (among non-language learners, 43.5% would be willing to pay and 69.3% showed interest in university credit). This unexpected result suggests that podcasting could be a source of revenue for content developers (some language learning providers already offer free podcasts but charge for related transcripts, activities, and tuition, cf. Rosell-Aguilar, 2007).

LIMITATIONS

As most research, this study is affected by a number of limitations. The large drop in participants after the first 12 months that the survey was active (for the reasons explained in the methods section) suggests that a similar study may not be replicable in terms of quantity of responses. Also, the data collected are self-reported, which makes the responses subjective to some extent. The respondents who took part in the survey represent a self-selected sample, clearly interested in iTunes U resources. From this we can assume they have access to devices that can play the resources and possess a certain degree of digital literacy as well as a positive attitude to learning through iTunes U resources. However, it is probably safe to assume that these characteristics are common to the majority of iTunes U learners. In addition, the hugely positive response to whether users think that the iTunes U resources they listen to are helping them learn must be tempered by the fact that this perceived learning is self-reported and has not been otherwise qualified in this study.

Whilst it would have been very useful to supplement the study with further research, such as interviews with a number of the respondents, it was felt that asking participants to provide contact details might dissuade some from taking part and therefore impact the number of responses collected. Also, given the wide geographical spread of respondents, it would have been difficult to carry out interviews with participants from different time zones.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Given the limited availability of previous research on external use of iTunes U as a language teaching and learning tool, the scope of this study has been exploratory and mainly descriptive. Research into this field needs to progress and go deeper in other areas such as whether the language that is being studied makes a difference in user attitudes and preferences.

Since respondents have chosen to learn through iTunes U resources, it follows that they must have a preference for or at least be comfortable with an auditory learning style. It would be worth researching what effect the delivery through this medium has on learners who have a different learning preference. Building on this, it would be worth conducting further research into the podcast listening practices of language learners: what are the differences between those who listen with transcripts and those who listen without them? Between those that listen as a main activity and those who listen on the move? Do users listen to the entire podcast as a whole or do they pause, rewind, or skip? Do they listen to the same podcast once or several times to improve comprehension? Whilst some of these issues have been covered in small studies (e.g., Gromik, 2008), there is a need for more comprehensive research projects.

So far, research into podcasting as a language learning tool has been mostly quantitative and focused on the learning of pronunciation. More qualitative studies are needed to find out more about this and other areas of language learning: whether this learning method leads to improved comprehension of the language, improved pronunciation and or intonation, knowledge and retention of grammar and vocabulary, and an understanding of the cultures of the target language, either as supplementary material or as the main source of learning. In addition, it would be interesting to follow up whether language learners who use the podcasts engage in focused listening or not, as the findings of this study are inconclusive in that respect.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reported results from the first major study into language learning resources delivered through iTunes U for learners external to the institution that provides them. It had been argued (Cebeci & Tekdal, 2006; Evans, 2008) that podcasts make materials accessible to a wider diversity of learners, but because most studies carried out have used internal learners as participants, there has been no differentiation between podcasts users and traditional students. The results of this study have provided the first profile of the iTunes U language learner and shown that learners in this context are different from the internal users that have been profiled in previous research into podcasting as a teaching and learning tool. Profiling what so far had been an unknown audience is a worthwhile pursuit, as current institutional practices are moving towards activities that generate interest from external learners such as iTunes U, the provision of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and the delivery of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs).

The results show that language learners have some practices in common with non-language learners, but some of these vary. Language learners who use iTunes U resources from the OU are mostly middle-aged, and there are more males than females, although there is a larger proportion of female respondents among the younger users. There are relatively few in full- or part-time education, and the majority of participants have full- or part-time employment. Most users download resources for personal interest, and nearly a fifth use the iTunes resources as their main source of learning. Users have a high opinion of the quality of the materials, and they believe the materials help them to learn. The results also show that over 70% users (most of the time or always) transfer language learning iTunes U resources to a mobile device and over 60% listen to them using mobile devices whilst taking part in other activities, in sharp contrast with previous research. This evidence supports considering iTunes U as a service that can enable mobile learning and, therefore, providers should take mobile learning design principles into consideration when planning the delivery of resources through iTunes U.

The suggestion in the results section that iTunes U language learners listen to the resources in a casual way may appear to counteract the potential benefits of focusing on form. This is not necessarily negative: listening to target language materials in an unfocussed manner rather than focusing on form or meaning is a valid activity as well: in doing so, learners may get used to the rhythm and sounds of the target language and notice intonation patterns, cognates or grammatical structures through incidental learning.

Although the research was carried out with the users of iTunes U resources from a distance learning institution that makes them available to independent learners, it is likely that the results will largely apply to external learners who use resources from other institutions as well. One important difference between OU on iTunes U resources and those of other providers is that the OU materials are designed as relatively small learning chunks (as described in the context section). This appears to be something that users like, given the huge popularity of OU on iTunes U resources, and may be particularly useful for language learning resources.

It is undeniable that podcasting generates interest in the institutions providing such resources, as evidenced by the increase in traffic towards their websites from the iTunes U pages; still, the degree to which this interest translates into further action—such as registering for a course—is uncertain. However, the unexpected positive reaction towards paying for content and offering course credit based on podcasting resources opens up new revenue-generating possibilities and directions for institutions of higher education, both in the field of language learning and beyond. This, however, would be against the principles of delivering free educational content and removing elitism from education. An alternative to offering course credit would be to offer online badges for lifelong learning, which—although without validity in many formal contexts—would recognise the effort that learners have made and might encourage further study.

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